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► To cite this version:

| Laurent Rieutort. Rurality. Hypergeo, 2013, pp.1-2. hal-00922134

**HAL Id: hal-00922134**

**<https://hal.science/hal-00922134>**

Submitted on 19 Jan 2014

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# Rurality

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As a set of collective representations of the characteristics that make up a form of identity and functioning specific to rural areas, rurality belongs to the town-country dyad, with recent changes in perceptions, practices, and modes of governance in these spaces. Classically the term rurality (commoner in French than in English) refers to 1) the characteristic of being "rural", the characteristics of rural spaces; -2) "a set of values, a culture specific to the rural environment" or to the "condition of country-dwellers" according to the French Littré dictionary, 1880, as opposed to urbanness, or urbanity which in French and particularly in English had come to refer to positive cultural traits (civility, politeness, courtesy, etc.) which were supposedly specific to city-dwellers, so that rurality could suggest rusticity and lack of style among country dwellers (or "country bumpkins"). But from the 1970s, an anti-urban ideology developed in Western nations, and with it a return to a valorising definition of rurality and its lifestyles (N. Mathieu).. Nevertheless, and until very recently, geographers have stuck with the adjective "rural". Then rurality, in France and elsewhere, took on a political dimension, culminating with the creation of a "Ministry of agriculture, food, fisheries and rurality" in 2004, followed by the setting up of a «*Conférence de la ruralité*» in the terms of the legislation of February 23rd 2005 relating to the development of rural **«territories»**. Beside the ideological dimension of the term, and in particular the tendency to idealise "country life" (ruralism), this caution on the part of researchers can be explained by epistemological debates on the very existence of a specifically rural society or reality in Western countries.

## Rurality and representations of what is rural

In the sociological conceptions of the 1970s (M. Jollivet H.Mendras) rural communities were seen as the opposite of the "encompassing" urban society, in particular because mutual acquaintance and interdependence between individuals in a group was one of the main features of their structuring. These rural societies were seen as being characterised by a close relationship between the local or micro-local space and the group of individuals. The countryside was the location of agriculture and craft industries conducted by autonomous populations attached to their «**territory**» and to the family group. However, given the dynamics of territorial opening-up and de-partitioning, society in rural spaces today is at once diversified (less and less agricultural), characterised by outside inputs and integrated into the urban world (aspirations and lifestyle have grown closer, populations are mobile, and multi-residence practices have developed). How then should we envisage local "belonging", or a rural identity, in this context of marked mobility? In the 1980s work by the French Observatoire du changement social (observatory of social change) (1986) did show a process of return to the local level, a "relocalisation" of social life, with new a migratory attractiveness of the countryside, opening the way for the notion of a "rural renaissance" (Kayser, 1990). The rediscovered rural setting was chosen because it enabled a return to a sociability of proximity and inter-acquaintance, as opposed to the presumed urban anonymity. Towards 1990, new readings of rurality were put forward. On the one hand, some authors consider that the rural space retains certain specific features by way of the representations it generates and the low population densities, which leave plenty of room for the agro-sylvo-pastoral environment, and for "open" «**landscapes**» where vegetation predominates and where buildings remain scattered. This space, where the influence of the city is nevertheless present, provides numerous functions and uses, leading to competition and conflict, but also to complementarity, or even "multi-functioning", which rural development players are looking for. On the other hand, there is the notion of a specific rural society, still propounded by B.Kayser (1992), who considers that this society is distinguished by the original relationships that rural dwellers establish with the landscape and built-up environment, with their "fellow rurals" in

communities structured by mutual acquaintance and strong social control, and with their "small" local region for its policy management. Feelings of belonging to the rural environment can now result from a choice in life, from positive imaginings (symbolic values underpinning recreational migrations, for instance), or even from economic trade-offs. Other "constructivist" researchers contest the hypothesis of a superimposition of a rural society on a rural space. B. Hervieu and J. Viard (1996) thus differentiate the categories of meaning urbanity/urban-ness and rurality from geographical realities, city and countryside. Urbanity or urban-ness has become an operator of the functioning and the organisation of the rural space. The "global" urban society has its word to say on the use of urban spaces, which have become "public". Numerous players allocate symbolic values to the countryside (heritage, environment, identity), as well as functions (landscape maintenance, "**«terroir»**" productions (local specialities), quality food, quality residence locations). There is an association between city lifestyles and values perceived as being rural (belonging locally, quality of life, sociability, time to spare etc.) and it is even possible to perceive "a certain ruralisation of urban societies and spaces" (Martin Vanier). Finally, if the contrast urban-rural persists in people's imagination "it is because the representation of a difference between the "urbanity" and "rurality" of a lifestyle is rooted in the minds of all the people who, via their mobility and migrations, seek to annex its advantages" (Sencébé, 2002) . Here we return to the definition of the "countryside" given by Jacques Lévy in his Dictionnaire de la géographie et des espaces des sociétés (2003): "a descriptive term that can be associated with various substances, in particular with perceptions in urban societies, for whom the countryside constitutes [...] the spatial dimension of the memory of rurality".

### **Rurality and town-country relationships**

Even so, the notions of urbanity and rurality are liable to fall into a dichotomous view of geographical phenomena, contrasting rural-urban, town-country, while this in fact has lost its relevance. There are not two separate worlds, but a spatial and ideational interpenetration between the urban and the rural. Boundaries are fading, the transitions and niches are complex, as in the "blurred" periurban spaces which are both urban in their

functioning (jobs, lifestyle) and rural by way of their landscapes (the place occupied by agricultural land use) and by way of the perceptions of the inhabitants who consider that they are living "in the country". In numerous countries, the rural space is also defined by the functional relationships that it sets up with urban spaces (this link being measurable by the daily commuting patterns from homes in the periphery to workplaces in the urban centre). In parallel, small and medium towns are the structure of rural spaces, and enable people living there to access employment and services. The territorialisation of development policies also entails a process of spatial recomposition and a review of administrative subdivisions. It contributes to the emergence of a new urban-rural dialogue, as in the processes observed in urbanism productions that associate city and peripheral rural zones.

The notion of "new forms of rurality" belongs to the fields of social geography and sociology, but also to the disciplines concerned with territorial development. It enables us to envisage the "dynamics at the heart of the new relationships between town and country, which concern the transformations of spaces, their residential, recreational and productivity usages, the experiences and perceptions of players involved, their relationships with the natural environment, notions of heritage, ecological challenges and the modes of governance in force" (INRA, 2008). Rurality is not an assumption, it is a social construction of the world, based on evolving perceptions and practices that need to be identified and interpreted, so as to produce a key for reading the changes affecting society as a whole.

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**P.S.**

ARLAUD S., JEAN Y., ROYOUN D., 2005, Rural-Urbain. Nouveaux liens, nouvelles frontières, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 506 p. Collectif, 2008, Prospective : les nouvelles ruralités en France à l'horizon 2030, Rapport, INRA, 82 p.